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# THE SITTER

Charlotte McCall Pattison

The sitter is thorough with the litter box; it is almost artistic, the way she tills the absorbent crystals like her own private Zen garden. She is skilled at making the old cat take all six of his heart medications. She eats a handful of salted peanuts every time she walks in the door; sometimes she also eats the dark chocolate chips stored in the cabinet. She has an eye on the level of each, the peanuts and the chocolate chips. If it gets obvious, she'll buy a replacement and dump the contents into the original container until the level is restored. Elizabeth said she should make herself at home.

The apartment is perfect for the sitter's needs. The cable TV is a luxury, the couch is comfortable for lounging, the bed is always freshly made when she arrives, and the claw-foot tub is a gift. She could pretend this is her apartment, and that *she* is the corporate executive for Macy's if it weren't for all the troubling personal touches, which she finds every time she opens a drawer or scrutinizes a fridge magnet.

Even though the apartment is small, she finds its silence eerie. Perhaps it is the cat who follows her from room to room with a forbidding countenance, waiting for her to settle in a location so he can fold himself primly in her lap like a longhaired paperweight. She has always had a hard time disturbing a sleeping animal. There is something precious about his sleep. The stolen hours here and there, one ear always cocked for predators, the slight twitch of the paws that might prove dreaming. It feels like a measure of trust to have an animal installed in your lap. You'd rather have your legs go numb than wake him. But her boyfriend sneers and says, "You are just like a space heater to them, they are drawn to warm places."

The longer the visits last—three weekends in a row, one or two weeks—the more snooping she feels is authorized. First, she just wants to know where Elizabeth goes when she leaves. Many of the trips are for work, but the two weeks in March are for ICELAND!!! scrawled in all-caps on the wall calendar. The sitter looks ahead for vacations to get an idea of how much money she can expect to earn. Several business trips in April, Sarah's Wedding! and *Thailand???* in mid-June. It is one of those personalized album calendars studded with photos of a blonde family of four with two cute kids hovering around the age of ten. Everyone's birthdays

and anniversaries come pre-marked. The woman in the pictures appears to be Elizabeth's sister. Munching on the stoneground wheat crackers she has been slowly depleting all week (she'll get more), the sitter wonders what it would be like to be close to the family who produced this calendar. Who else did they send it to? How many people were expected to filter the next year of their lives through the main events of someone else's?

At least Elizabeth's bedside reading is indicative of simmering psychological distress: *YOU ARE A BADASS: How To Stop Doubting Your Greatness And Start Living An Awesome Life*; *Daring Greatly*; and confusingly, *The Subtle Art of Not Giving A Fuck*. The sitter thumbs through them while the cat purrs in her lap. Some pages are dog-eared for reference. In *YOU ARE A BADASS*, the reader is invited to list their best qualities. Here Elizabeth has written in pencil: *caring, family-oriented, adventurous, animal lover, active, ambitious*. The whole page is smudged with eraser dust and false starts. The sitter pets the cat too hard. He snaps and moves to give his tail a tongue-combing in the corner. Her boyfriend texts her to invite himself over, he wants to *try out that bathtub* ;), but she doesn't reply.

Other things: The bedside drawer with the two packs of unopened condoms, a half-burnt candle, a bottle of lube barely squeezed, but no sex toy. A note-to-self taped to the fridge door reminding Elizabeth to *call the gym and ask about personal training sessions (remember: not Stefan!)*. What did Stefan do or say? The butterfly collection pinned behind glass in a shadow box on the wall. The case is antique, a relic from prior age of animal cruelty. Maybe it also descends from the grandmother who handwrote dessert recipes on little cards that have also been glass-cased and memorialized next to dried purple flowers. The straightforward recipe for cobbler with the postscript to future generations: *This is a quick recipe when you are in a hurry and very good!*

Next to the Ziploc bags she finds a list of attributes that Elizabeth is seeking in a partner written on an index card. They are the same ones she wrote in *YOU ARE A BADASS*, with a few additions which may be qualities she feels she lacks: *calm, spiritual, good sense of humor*. Or perhaps direct correctives for a previous love: *patient, serious, kind*. The sitter takes a picture of the list to text her boyfriend but deletes it immediately once she sees how the photo looks. Her phone has framed the list as bright and insignificant, the same as the recipe. Taking the photograph makes the sitter feel sick; for days she sees it whenever she closes her eyes. The next weekend she opens the same drawer and the list has vanished but the feeling remains.

Elizabeth is in Iceland and the sitter is on her couch, the cat pinned in her lap and yowling while she administers his second heart medication. Elizabeth left a big tip this time. Her note said *THANK YOU! You're the best.* A text appears on the sitter's phone screen. Her boyfriend invites himself over to the "cat condo," he says he wants to *take a bath together* ;). But if he gets in the bath, he'll see the little rubber duck that Elizabeth placed next to the faucet. He'll see her hair removal cream with its label turned shyly towards the wall. He might eat her gummy vitamins and sneer at the copy of *Women's Health* wrinkled with bath-reading. He's exactly the kind of man who would put on Elizabeth's polka dot shower cap and do a stupid dance.

She takes the cat's water dish, with its surface wisps of floating hair. She drops in three salted peanuts and a spoonful of chocolate chips for sweetness. From the bathroom cabinet she takes a pump of anti-aging cream and an aspirin for unexpected pain. A dash of lube from the bedside drawer. On Elizabeth's fire escape she looks for something natural and sees with a guilty pang the scraggly basil plant she has forgotten to care for. A few withered leaves will have to do. Behind her the cat is testing an exit, he has one paw out the door before she softly closes the screen. The sitter knows that when she pours this charmed stew into the alley, she should say something that matters, but it isn't easy to think. She looks at the mess she's made and thinks "Dump," the cat in the doorframe sees his dish and purrs: "*Drink.*"

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Charlotte McCall Pattison is a student in the MFA program at Cornell University. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Passages North* and *Smokelong Quarterly*.